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**Title: Talking to Alaska****Author: Anna Woltz**

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**LIKES****Characters and relationships:**

- Love the dog
- Emotional vulnerability of the characters, not just the main characters but adults as well. Engaging and relatable.
- The character of Sven – well-rounded, easy to relate to. His anger an interesting take on how disability could affect you
- A brave, adventurous, self-determining female character overcoming difficulties and challenges
- Presentation of adults has having as many issues as the kids do- parents can be vulnerable too
- Really child-centred
- Loved how the characters filled holes in each other's lives
- Alaska as a conduit between Sven and Parker
- Loved the gradual relationship between Alaska and Sven
- Liked Parker's sense of responsibility and that she recognises when she needs help
- Liked the young people's awareness of what's going on with the adults- felt realistic- it was subtle and well-drawn
- Love Parker's relationship with her brothers
- Nuanced, flawed characters- Sven not that likable at the beginning
- Sven's transformation from resentful victim to hero
- Lovely presentation of supportive teacher
- The depiction of Parker re-uniting with Alaska
- Explanation of Parker's anxiety

**Structure and Style:**

- Accessible for most reading levels
- Well translated and nice to read a YA book in translation for a change
- Short punchy chapters
- Enjoyed the accents in the audio book version
- Other worldly sense of a book in translation
- Really funny book
- Loved the gradual unravelling of Parker's backstory
- It's not bleak!

## LIKES

- Different perspectives were presented really well and may introduce students to a wider repertoire of literary techniques to imitate and use in their own writing.
- Dual narrative worked really well
- So relieved that the dog didn't die
- It's so deep but in a light, accessible way- deceptively simple but sophisticated
- The more fantastical elements also might lead to fruitful discussions around whether they worked in the novel; whether students might like to try writing in a similar way or not

**Themes: Epilepsy/Mental Health/Moral Ambiguity/Social Media**

- Personal connection with epilepsy – good to see the representation and have a different setting/culture
- The ticking time bomb of Sven's seizures – unusual way to create tensions and gave an insight into his life
- it touched on the harm and in some cases the debilitating nature surrounding social media which would relate to KS3 readers and provide a stimulus for discussion
- The break into Sven's room - though fantastical - in some ways also believable. Might lead onto interesting discussions around whether students have ever had to break in somewhere.
- Appealing to a young person's sense of adventure and risk taking
- Relating to a young person's sense of acting without considering the consequences
- Offering opportunities to think, discuss and debate the moral dilemmas surrounding breaking into someone's room within in a modern context
- Positive with accepting differences and understanding of life-changing illness or trauma and positives and negatives of social media – especially for younger Year 7 readers
- Good story to highlight the roles of service/assistance dogs
- Exploring differences and developing empathy
- Looking at different and invisible disabilities, which some students have experience of
- Wholesome story- moral lessons/message
- Presentation of mental health- hard but not sensationalised or overly dramatized
- Realistic inclusion of technology- they google things, use social media etc.

**DISLIKES**

- Some themes were cliched
- Moral ambiguity of Parker breaking into Sven's house
- Unsure about a young person going out at night, wearing a balaclava – quite negative
- Concerned about the message to students e.g., to fight crime themselves, in a dangerous situation
- A bit too nice and cliched
- The ending – felt that Parker and Sven wouldn't be friends at the end... may only agree not to dislike each other
- Some felt that the voices in each chapter were not written distinctively enough: However, another member, who listened to the audio book on audible (available free) said that the voices were very distinct – Parker's quicker, erratic and Sven's slow.
- Didn't like Sven – too cold/a bully
- Parker breaking into Sven's room. Not believable/a bit creepy. If a boy was breaking into a girl's room it would definitely be creepy!
- Some unbelievable elements – lots of coincidences, triangulating the phones to catch the bad guy, he's the only person in the world with those trainers etc
- Setting – would have liked more sense of Holland as a place and culture. Trying to be too universal?
- Wanted more depth – a problem with the dual narrative?
- Lacked poetry, too much telling not showing
- Bit twee at times – didn't need every single plot element to be tied up neatly with a happy ending
- Enjoyed the first part but it tailed off/became a bit repetitive
- Why make it a romance? Seemed a bit forced and would have preferred just a friendship
- Rushed presentation of parents- seemed 2 dimensional
- Unrealistic happy ending- false hope of dad suddenly being fine?
- Disliked the scene where they are following the robber
- Disliked the scene that discussed the patriarchy as Parker didn't have good enough response despite being a strong character
- Not sure about front cover- would kids in KS3 want to read about a dog?
- Implausibility of triangulating phones- magically getting fixed

**PUZZLES**

- Mentioned that in Parker's family there are 4 children with ADHD – why didn't we explore this aspect of Parker more?
- For that many coincidences to be believable it must be quite a small town? But if so, would the robbers stay around?
- Parker going to Sven's bedroom in her balaclava, is she somehow acting out the attack on her parents' shop?
- How come Sven didn't recognise Parker?
- Does the writer have personal experience with epilepsy?
- Thoughts that younger readers may not be able to assess the ages of the characters, with them being in Class 1B
- The fact that when the Police were called, they didn't follow it up and just said phone the hotline. Pupils may be worried about phoning the police in future with genuine concerns thinking that they won't help.
- Thought the dog would talk!
- How did they train the dog to be a service dog so quickly?
- How did dad recover so quickly?

**PATTERNS (Within this book and links to other books and real-life experiences)****Within the novel**

- Alternate chapters creating a dual narrative between Parker and Sven
- Links between the narratives – same event from different points of view
- Break ins and balaclavas
- How to be safe, but live your life
- Motif- on mars- unknown situation, all struggling
- Control- needing to be in control- trauma, risk as coping mechanism
- Call to adventure- think, feel, do- illness and trauma
- Acceptance
- Separation- making difficult choices- head and heart
- Layout of chapters- different for the two characters- more spacing and disjointed for Sven
- Figurative language about the dad

**PATTERNS (Within this book and links to other books and real-life experiences)****Real life links**

- Family members with epilepsy
- Anxiety
- Starting a new school, trying to make an impression etc
- Bonds with animals, especially dogs
- People are icebergs – a good message for any age group
- Masking feelings
- First aid

**Links to other books / film**

Themes of identify, friendship, hiding information away, how brains work:

- A Monster Calls, Patrick Ness – illness, loss, grief
- We are all made of molecules, Susan Richardson – dual narrative
- Divergent Book series, Veronica Roth
- When the World was Ours, Liz Kessler – 3 character narrative
- Stone Cold, Robert Swindells (for Year 9)
- Common themes – the outsider
- The Boy with the Butterfly Mind by Victoria Williamson – preteens with divorcing parents, mental health issues
- Check Mates by Stuart Foster – boy with ADHD
- Wonder by RJ Palacio
- Flush: A Biography – Virginia Woolf tells the life of Elix=zabeth Barrat Browning from the point of view of her spaniel.
- You've got mail
- State of Grace
- The Soup Movement
- Run Rebel

**HOOKS**

- Dogs/animals
- Mystery element
- Friendship story
- Budding romance
- A book for a Y6-7 transition project
- Displays in libraries – linked to empathy and neuro-diversity
- The dog will appeal to pupils – (more girls)
- Alaska's split scene where she has to decide between Parker and Sven
- Use the questions for discussion at back of book but make them ambiguous so it doesn't ruin the plot

**READING ALOUD, HAVING IGNITED THEIR CURIOSITY**

- Probably too long for just a class read
- Use with small groups, book groups, whole class
- Recommend to colleagues
- Short chapters for reluctant or struggling readers

**OUTPUTS FOLLOWING READING (ORAL AND WRITTEN)**

- Research and discussion about how humans use animals: pets; assistance animals; school therapy dogs; animals in service.
- Tell/write about a real-life event that happened to you from a point of view other than your own
- Write part of the story from Alaska's point of view
- Tell part of the story from the point of view of someone else in 1B
- Make a video to add to the embarrassing stories 1B share to make Sven feel less alone
- Look at extracts from Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography*.
- Buddy-reading eg a Year 12 with a Year 8 – to improve reading and social skills
- Use as part of a project for Year 7/8 during Empathy Week or to introduce Empathy Day
- Prose-reading in performing arts competition
- PSHE- social media, grief, trauma
- Storyboard a film of their embarrassing moment like 1B do
- Art- make the characters
- Write Alaska's memories/diary

**RESOURCES**

- Resources pack: <https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/5062/>

**OTHER**

- One member has a pupil with epilepsy in their Year 8 tutor group. The epilepsy is controlled with drugs. Ideal book to read with the tutor group to explore the issues faced by the pupil, other hidden disabilities, as well as the positives and negatives of social media.